

Esther Sibiude

Esra



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## Esra

A radio drama performed live in the Queens Museum's Panorama of New York City. Sunday, November 14th, 2021 as part of *Year of Uncertainty* organized by MPR and Queens Museum.

Written by Esther Sibiude

With musical interludes interpreted by:

Justine Lugli - viola

Esther Sibiude - harp

Lucia della Paolera - voice

Allyson Clare - violin and viola

Narration by Jett Strauss

Esra used to be round like a sphere. She had two faces, one on each side, and two pairs of feet and arms sticking out of her body. She rolled around in circles and her life felt like a continuous whole without any clean-cut nor trenchant distinctions. She danced all day and all night. On some evenings, when very drunk, she climbed into the sky to flirt with the moon. The gods eventually punished her for this. They split her in two halves as one would split an egg with a wire. This continued on: the two halves split into four quarters, the quarters into eighths and so on and so forth. The gods confused her many tongues and memories. Esra's different parts were scattered around the world. They spoke different languages, and were lost in translation.

One of the Esras lived in a 235 square foot studio apartment in a condo with 108 units—twelve units on each floor. There were nine floors and four elevators. The city had thousands of these buildings and the country had hundreds of similar cities.

Inside the apartment, furniture pieces interlocked with one another like a 3D jigsaw puzzle. Most of her things were far out of immediate reach, tucked away in crevices between sofas, drawers, and shelves. Small items like keys and wallets got lost instantly. Sometimes things disappeared for good.

The bed was in the center of the room where she lay for most of the day with a phone, a computer, some snacks, and other essentials. The lamp next to the bed was the spirit that watched over her and the apartment. Its incandescent light was bumblebee yellow and burned day and night. It guided her dreams or kept her conscious in the dark. During the brightness of the day it turned into a discrete stain.

She had sewn some of her clothes together into a curtain that covered the single window of her apartment. Every morning, sunlight pierced through the diaphanous quilt and heat would enter the apartment, stroke her temple, and would wake her up. Esra slept with her head facing east towards sunrise. She believed that images from past dreams emanated down to her along the path of the sun and that her positioning enabled her to pursue unfinished dreams.

At night her soul turned away from the world and she dreamt about the inside of her body while the walls of the apartment grew closer to her skin. She had one recurring dream:

A rolling TV stand supports her guts which are modeled in clay. Her organs lay dispersed on the carpet and are wrapped in athletic mesh fabric, like the type used on sneakers. Harp and violin strings are stretched throughout the room and styrofoam debris floats in the air between the tight strings.

Two drawers full of socks and gloves open and close in a rhythmic Cumbia type of beat. On the coffee table, the daily paper moves like a tongue about to taste and swallow down the breaking news feed.

Her brain hides in the furniture, within the electrified household.

She looks for a second skin, a carapace, something stronger and denser than the first one. She dives into a chasm; into the haunted placenta.



There, she builds the nest, the cave: she digs and lives in the pipes.  
In this remarkably comfortable stewpot is the cozy chaos.  
Her troglodyte sister rubs her face against the doormat of her chamber.  
In the dream, Esra feels her senses dissipate one after the other.  
Her nose bleeds; it flows onto her nightshirt.  
Sheets and blankets, their napping eyes, the heavy sleep that wakes her.  
She can't run errands, she no longer leaves the house.  
On the ground floor she begins to vivisect her objects.  
She rips open the skin of a chair and puts it aside.  
She splinters her furniture, decomposes the calendar, digs out the living room's organs like  
a kinetic embryo of unborn days.  
Inside, the skeleton is dry, transformed into the knitting machine.

In the shrunken room there is no gravity, no calm  
Outside a great horn rattles her floor  
It is the dripping morning  
The doorbell rings: another box, a carry bag.  
Nothing but delivered food.

When she awoke she heard motors idling eight floors below. Trucks lined the streets and men in brown uniforms plucked packages from huge stacks. Every day was the same choreography: the city's buildings swallowed the content of the delivery boxes and regurgitated the indigestible cardboard, foam, and bubble wrap. Esra held onto these materials. They reminded her of the dream. She broke down each cardboard box and stored the flat panels between her sofas and drawers.

Esra collected all kinds of artifacts that she bought online; Bavarian cuckoo clocks, watercolors of the Eiffel Tower, Japanese stuffed animals, inflatable flowers, canes from Madagascar... but boredom and dust settled on the extinct world of Esra's souvenirs. The thin coat of pulverized particles turned everything into an opaque phantom of itself. The cloudy powder was inexorable; it crept from the streets and skies into her apartment and slowly shifted into a soft carpet that covered her life and made the elusive passing of time palpable. She bought a variety of containers to protect her possessions...but she still had to feather dust the cases and boxes in order to forget about the stillness of things.

Whenever Esra felt nervous about something, she grabbed the bubble wrap that she kept under her bed and popped plastic bubbles while she watched TV. She watched a lot of TV in general: Talkshows like the View or Ellen played in the background while she worked and once she was done with work she watched HBO. When she finished a series, she would listen to a podcast about the series where the director or main actor was interviewed about the experience of the "making of the series" and gave some insights into the dynamic of the cast and crew. She streamed the podcast on her phone that lay next to her ear and would fall asleep.







During the winter, the nights were long and Esra spent more time on her phone. One day, while she used the phone's camera as a mirror to fix her makeup, she drowned in her own image and accidentally fell in love with herself. The reduced silhouette of Esra within the square frame of the picture was perfectly flat and still. She seemed at ease, secure. Esra envied this image of herself. She aspired to achieve this form of smooth, perfect flatness.

She still shopped online but didn't bother to open the boxes anymore. Her door was barricaded with what looked like cardboard bricks. Her photo library was composed entirely of images of herself and of receipts of purchase. The hours spent browsing and shopping sharpened the algorithm to such a degree that any keywords she searched brought her to something that she desired profoundly. She achieved an ecstatic state—everything she saw on the screen pleased her, nothing contradicted her senses or made her think twice, everything was written for her. She felt in osmosis with her destiny and started to love herself even more. Scrolling through her selfies turned her on and often led her to masturbate.

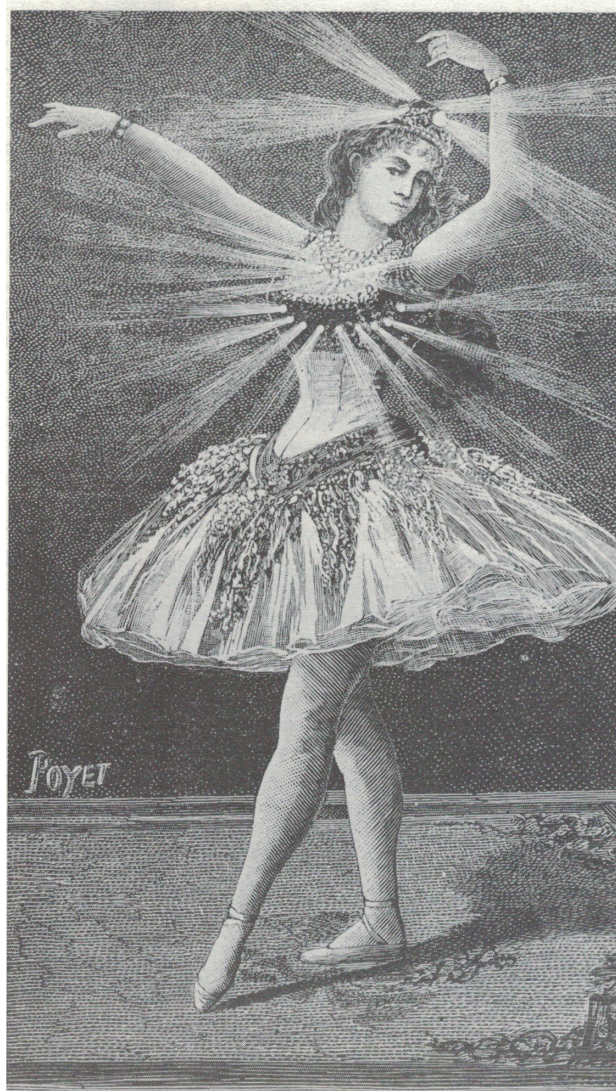
Somewhere between the chip, the wifi, and the screen, Esra was encrypted, lost in the maze of informatics and obsessed with algorithmic fashion. Whenever she didn't look at her smartphone, she firmly held it inside her pocket until it was sweaty and warm. Notifications and alarms vibrated and tickled her palm. At this point it was mainly she who sent information to herself in a continuous loop. This exercise resulted in a web that held in place all the messages, dreams, and memories of previous nights and days, and allowed the little machine to foresee the future of Esra's desire.

In another recurring dream Esra rides the elevators of her building up and down. She wears a big baroque dress that takes up the entire cabin. Her face shines and sparkles because of the glitter she mixed in with her face powder. In the dream, the elevator stops on the top floor, she walks down the hallway, pushes the emergency door open and steps out to the roof. The night is calm and navy blue and thousands of silver roofs spread into a shiny plateau like the ocean on a moonlit evening.

The moon is a large orange croissant with fuzzy contour, framed between two skyscrapers. Every time Esra looks away the moon has changed its location in the sky. Thin moss and seaweed grow up from the shining urban sprawl into an infinite net and tangles with the stars. These organic vines seem fragile—decayed and dangerous to navigate. Esra reaches up and tugs on the web above, finds that the web's strands are actually quite sturdy—sturdy enough to support her and her hefty dress—so she climbs up and swings from one rooftop to another, gliding across the deep chasms between buildings. As she swings, bits of moss and dried muck flit off the vines and drift in the vastness of the deep blue light.

She is not alone; all the other Esras visit this same place in their dreams. They grasp and hang and crawl on the web while the night breeze sways and distorts the stringy scaffolding. Some of the Esras jump off the vines and float down onto escalators between the skyscrapers and disappear downward, somewhere. No one knows where these lead.

The others oscillate around the moon in a clumsy dance. They can never touch, just glimpse at one another and feel the pull of the vine network. Their proximity and tension make them smile. The light air of the night fills them with the emotion of reunion.



Electric jewels.  
(Source: *L'illustration*, 1881)